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C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 000219

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [CASC](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [LA](#)  
SUBJECT: EAP/MLS DIRECTOR,S MEETING WITH MFA DIRECTOR  
GENERAL

Classified By: Mary Grace McGeehan, Charge d'Affaires. Reason: 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Visiting EAP/MLS director Robert Rapson met with Europe and Americas Director General Southam at the foreign ministry. Both Rapson and Southam expressed general satisfaction about improving U.S.-Lao ties, despite what Southam characterized as ups and downs over the years. Rapson suggested that both sides should be looking at scheduling the the second meeting of the U.S.-Lao bilateral dialogue, perhaps in Washington later this year in the summer or fall. He expressed concern that the Thai and Lao governments, in ongoing discussions regarding possible relocation to Thailand of a group of 150 ethnic Hmong, are not recognizing the group's right to pre-screening by UN refugee officials. He appealed for consular access to an American citizen who has been detained for several months. Southam did not accept Rapson,s appeals to respect international norms on refugees but agreed to try to facilitate consular access to the detained American (which had not been granted as of March 19). End summary.

¶2. (C) Visiting EAP/MLS Office Director Robert Rapson, accompanied by DCM, called on Southam Sakonhninhom, Director General for Europe and Americas at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) on March 2. Southam described the relationship between Laos and the U.S. as &up and down8 over time, but essentially friendly. He said that his office often intervenes with other ministries to advance U.S. goals. This was the case, for instance, when the Bilateral Trade Agreement was being negotiated. Rapson expressed appreciation for this cooperation, and said that the October 2006 bilateral dialogue represented important progress in the relationship. In looking ahead to the next session of the dialogue, Rapson suggested Washington as the next venue, perhaps in the summer or fall. For the next session, Rapson noted that it could be useful to have other Lao ministries agencies join the MFA on the Lao side. Southam said that the ministry would consider this proposal.

Hmong Issues  
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¶3. (C) Rapson noted that the Lao government had agreed to receive over 150 ethnic Hmong people who had been residing at the Petchabun refugee camp in Thailand. However, the Thai government halted the deportation in response to international concerns about their welfare should they be returned to Laos. The group remains in Nong Khai, across the Mekong River from Vientiane. Rapson said that international norms require screening by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) when people have a possible claim for refugee status, as this group does. Southam said that the Lao and Thai governments had met and decided that these people were not refugees. Rapson reiterated that it is up to UNHCR to make this determination. He pressed Southam and Lao government to improve access to and allow for international monitoring of returned Hmongs as key to

international support for any repatriation arrangement between Thailand and Laos.

#### Prisoner Access

14. (C) Rapson expressed concern about the Embassy's lack of access to American prisoner Yerlee Youngkue. The Embassy first brought this case to MFA's attention in a January 5 diplomatic note. Ambassador Haslach wrote a letter to Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith on March 1 requesting consular access. Rapson noted that the Vienna Convention requires that countries grant prompt consular access to detained foreign nationals. Southam said that Britain has experienced similar problems and pledged to assist in obtaining access to Mr. Yerlee. (Note: As of March 19, the Embassy had still not received permission to visit Yerlee despite continued efforts. The Embassy sent a follow-up diplomatic note on March 12. End note.)  
MCGEEHAN